

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In *Echoes of Tattered Tongues: Memory Unfolded*, the author John Guzlowski tells his family's story primarily through poems. He could have written the same story entirely as a prose narrative. How does his choice of medium impact your perception of the story? Do you find the use of poetry more or less powerful than a straightforward prose narrative would have been? Why?
2. Another technique used by the author is to tell the story backwards in time. Do you think this is more effective or less effective than telling the story in chronological order? Why?
3. In what ways are the title *Echoes of Tattered Tongues*, and subtitle *Memory Unfolded*, appropriate for this book?
4. In the opening prose piece of Book I—Half a Century Later, entitled "The Wooden Trunk," the author describes the wooden trunk made by his father from the walls of their refugee-camp barracks, in which the family brought their meager possessions to America. His parents carried that trunk with them in every move they made throughout the rest of their lives in America, even when they left behind other furniture. Why do you think his parents did that? Is it significant that they eventually painted and papered over the trunk?
5. After his mother's death, the author decided to sell the wooden trunk. What did that trunk mean to the author? Was he right in deciding not to keep it? What would you have done?
6. If you were forced to move to a new land and allowed to take only one trunk of possessions for your entire family, what would you put in that trunk?

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7. Most people are aware of how the Germans targeted Jews for extinction during World War II, now commonly referred to as the Holocaust. Before reading *Echoes of Tattered Tongues*, were you aware that Christian civilians such as the author's parents were also rounded up by the Germans and sent to concentration camps, where they were forced to work as slave laborers with little chance of survival? How does this affect your understanding of what was at stake in World War II?
8. Shortly before invading Poland to begin World War II, Hitler reportedly commanded his forces "to kill without pity or mercy, all men, women, and children of Polish descent or language." Would you classify this campaign against all Poles as part of the Holocaust? Why or why not?
9. In Book I, we see the author's parents near the end of their lives. What are their views on life, aging and dying? How are they similar? How are they different? How would you describe the author's relationship with his parents in Book I?
10. In the introductory section of Book II—Refugees, the author includes a prose piece called "The Happy Times and Places." What are those happy times and places like? Why do you think the author feels he needs to include them at the start of Book II? What are your memories of "happy times and places" while you were growing up? How do they compare to the author's?
11. The neighborhood in Chicago where the author's family settled was populated by many immigrants and refugees. We see glimpses of this neighborhood in several of the poems, especially those in the "Friends in America" series. What sense of the lives of these other immigrants does the author give us in this section?

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12. Recently, we hear a lot about PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) in connection with military veterans returning from combat. The author's parents were Polish peasants—civilians, not soldiers. Nevertheless, what signs of PTSD do you see in the author's parents? How about in some of their neighbors described in Book II?
13. The author's parents came from different parts of Poland (his father, from the northwest; his mother, from the southeast), were sent to different concentration camps, did not meet until after the war, and of course were of different sexes. What things do each of them remember about the war? How did their wartime experiences differ? How were they similar?
14. After the war, how did each parent deal with the trauma he or she had experienced during the war?
15. What is the relationship between the author's parents like? Should they have gotten divorced? Why didn't they?
16. How do his parents' wartime experiences affect the author and his sister Danusia? Describe both the short-term and long-term impacts.
17. The author doesn't say much about what the refugee camps in Germany were like after the war, but he does drop some hints. How does he describe them?
18. What is America like for the new immigrants? What kind of experiences does the author talk about? How do the experiences of the author and his sister, who were children, compare to their parents' experiences as new immigrants?
19. As the author and his sister grow up, they reject their immigrant background and their "old-world" parents in order to become "American." Do you think this is a typical dynamic in immigrant

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families? As the author and his sister mature into adults, does their relationship with their parents and their own immigrant past evolve, and if so, how? If you, or any of your family or friends, are immigrants, how does that experience compare to the experiences of the author's family?

20. When we think of immigrants and refugees, we tend to focus on their experiences in the new country, but often their own thoughts are on the people they left behind in the old country. What does the author tell us about the lives of those who were left behind?
21. In the introductory section of Book III—War, the author begins with two poems (“Landscape with Dead Horses” and “Fear”) and a prose piece called “September 1, 1939: The Day World War II Began.” How does this introduction prepare us for the works that follow?
22. In the two poems “My Mother Before the War” and “My Father Before the War,” the author quickly sketches a portrait of prewar Poland. What are his parents’ lives like during peacetime? What memories of prewar life did each parent carry with them? What part, if any, do these memories play during and after the war?
23. In a series of poems under the title “The German Soldiers” that appears early in Book III, the author switches our point of view to the invading German soldiers. What is the war like for these men?
24. In the poem “Fear,” the author suggests that what lingers after the war, after a traumatic experience, is a sense of fear. Think back to the poems you read in Books I and II. Was there fear expressed in those poems?
25. In the long poem “Third Winter of War: Buchenwald,” the author uses a surrealist approach, mixing dreams and impressionistic realism, to convey a sense of the horrors of his father's experience.

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How effective is this technique compared to the more graphic poems and prose pieces?

26. A number of poems make mention of God. How does each parent's image of God change as a result of their wartime experiences? How do they differ from each other? What is the author's image of God? How does this compare with your image of God?
27. What poems or prose pieces affected you most strongly, and why?
28. What do you think the author wants you to carry away from this book?